

miles an hour, when, suddenly, they heard a loud noise and saw the shuttle begin to come apart.

We soon realized that the worst had happened: The shuttle broke into several pieces as it reentered Earth's atmosphere, and all seven astronauts aboard lost their lives.

The crew of *Columbia* included two Texans: Rick Husband and Willie McCool, along with Michael Anderson, Kalpana Chawla, David Brown, Laurel Clark, and Ilan Ramon. They were scheduled to land at Kennedy Space Center just 15 minutes after passing over Texas.

The disaster left a field of wreckage that stretched from Fort Worth, across East Texas, and into Louisiana. Texas is a big place, but that means virtually the whole breadth of our State was covered with wreckage.

The government, of course, immediately launched a massive search to recover pieces of the space shuttle in order to determine what went wrong. NASA officials, National Guard troops, and law enforcement at all levels began scouring the landscape to recover pieces of the shuttle. Divers from the Environmental Protection Agency led efforts to recover pieces that fell into the Toledo Bend Reservoir near Hemp-hill.

Some 25,000 volunteers from Texas and Louisiana helped search an area that covered 2.3 million acres. They ranged from college students at nearby Stephen F. Austin to teams of ham radio operators who helped law enforcement with communications. As Texans and Americans do, people from all walks of life came together at a time of tragedy and rallied behind a unified effort to help bring answers to a nation in mourning.

This tragedy happened just a couple of months into my first Senate term, and I witnessed this massive response effort in action.

In the aftermath, I visited an area in Nacogdoches, which is over in East Texas, where tents were set up by search teams. It was remarkable to see the dedication of men and women firsthand engaged in this effort.

Search crews battled the rain and cold temperatures as they combed through pine forests and underbrush searching for wreckage. Recovery teams and volunteers found everything from a 600-pound piece of a main engine to the sole of a spacesuit boot. These discoveries, of course, were crucial to the investigation, which helped NASA understand what went wrong and how we could prevent similar accidents from occurring in the future.

In the months and years since, the Agency underwent an extensive transformation of its culture and operations to improve the safety of future missions. Jon Clark, a former NASA flight surgeon, whose wife Laurel was killed on *Columbia* said:

Their sacrifice has evolved into a safer space program.

Those changes are no consolation for the families who lost loved ones 20

years ago today, but I hope they can find some comfort in the knowledge that these American heroes made a lasting impact on America's space program.

I appreciate the Texans who came together in the wake of this tragedy to preserve pieces of *Columbia* and provide NASA and these families with answers that they so earnestly sought. Their efforts, then and now, have helped make the Nation's space program safer and more successful.

As we mark the 20th anniversary of the loss of *Columbia*, I am proud to co-sponsor a Senate resolution to commemorate the loss of *Columbia* and honor its crew. I appreciate the bipartisan support of Senators on both sides of the aisle who have joined in this effort, and I hope the resolution will pass unanimously today.

Today, we pay tribute to seven courageous individuals who lost their lives aboard the Space Shuttle *Columbia*. We remember, we honor, and we celebrate their commitment to research, exploration, and the pursuit of the extraordinary. We honor their legacy by continuing to push the boundaries of scientific discovery and human space.

I yield the floor.

RECESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate stands in recess until 2:15 p.m.

Thereupon, the Senate, at 12:30 p.m., recessed until 2:15 p.m. and reassembled when called to order by the Presiding Officer (Ms. ROSEN).

SUPPORTING THE OBSERVATION OF NATIONAL TRAFFICKING AND MODERN SLAVERY PREVENTION MONTH—Continued

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from West Virginia.

INFLATION

Mrs. CAPITO. Madam President, I rise today to discuss yet another of the consequences of President Biden's policies, and that is that prices are going up, the price hikes.

Families in West Virginia and across our Nation are struggling because the policies and priorities of these past 2 years have made essential items and goods seemingly unattainable. Whether it is gas, goods or services, energy prices, utility costs, small business expenses, owning a home, or simply affording to put food on the table, American families are squeezed at every turn.

According to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, prices have risen 13.7 percent since President Biden took office. A recent report from the Heritage Foundation found that because of that staggering rise, the average American family has \$7,400 less in their pocket at the end of the year.

This is a timely topic today because the Federal Reserve has just an-

nounced the eighth consecutive interest rate hike they have had to deploy in order to curb this administration's 2-year spending spree which is fueling our high-inflation economy. But an interest rate hike—once reserved as a measure that sends a direct signal to policymakers—is just another Wednesday in this President's America.

Chairman Powell warned last August that the continued interest rate increases and inflationary pressures would bring "pain to households and businesses." And, boy, does that ring true today. Meanwhile, President Biden continues to laud small inflation changes and slowed economic growth, but he refuses to recognize his administration's role in the record-high prices that the American middle class is continuing to have to face or the further economic fallout Americans are likely to face—projected by many economists—later this year from interest rate hikes in the past year.

So let's just dive into this a little bit. Whether it is a conversation with Senate colleagues, waiting in line at a store, or a constituent calling my office, the cost of food remains a central topic of concern all across this Nation. According to the most recent reports from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the cost of groceries went up 11.8 percent from the year prior. You hear about it with meat, eggs, bread, and butter—all the essentials. To add to this, the cost of restaurant purchases is up 8.4 percent. In fact, the price of every food category has continued to grow at a faster rate than its historical average.

A recent PBS analysis also points out that America's rural population is experiencing their cost of living going up faster and lingering longer than those in urban areas, and that is a factor that disproportionately impacts people in my State of West Virginia. In the words of one West Virginian who wrote in to my office, "How are we supposed to keep our houses warm and food on the table?"

Speaking of housing, it remains unaffordable. Because of President Biden's price hikes, fixed mortgage rates rose from 3.4 percent in January of 2022 to over double, 7.12 percent, in a matter of months. The National Association of Realtors' Housing Affordability Index dipped below 100, signifying that average American families do not have enough money to qualify for a mortgage on a median-priced home. In other words, new families and hard-working individuals who made smart financial decisions with the hope of purchasing a home can no longer pursue that dream because it is out of reach; it is unaffordable.

Moving to energy—something that is absolutely central to the proud history and tradition of our State, my State—despite the recent downturn in energy prices, it can't be forgotten that Americans are still paying 30 percent more for energy, and at its peak in June of 2022, it was 70 percent more. With costs